

Hun, (Thos)

ADDRESS

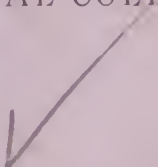
BEFORE THE

GRADUATING CLASS

OF THE

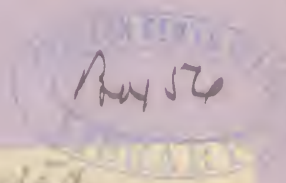
ALBANY MEDICAL COLLEGE,

BY



THOMAS HUN, M. D.

1877.



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ALBANY:

J. MUNSELL, PRINTER.

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A D D R E S S .

Hippocrates, the founder of medicine, before he would admit a candidate into the ranks of his disciples, bound him by an oath to lead a pure and honest life ; never to prostitute to any base use the knowledge which was to be imparted to him ; and to devote himself in the exercise of his profession to the service of his fellow men with fidelity and zeal. At this day no such formality is exacted of those who are admitted into the ranks of our profession ; but it is, nevertheless, thought fitting to seize an occasion like the present, while we tender to you our best wishes for your future success and happiness, to admonish you of the high duties you have assumed and of the obligation you are under to perform them faithfully and conscientiously.

It has, perhaps, never occurred to you to estimate the weight of the responsibility which from this day rests upon you and upon us. In the practice of your profession the health and lives of men are to be entrusted to you ; and we have certified to the world that you possess the capacity and skill which fit you to assume this trust. In virtue of the certificates which have just been placed in your hands, you are to possess a power which is given to no magistrate nor to any other citizen, that of deciding on the lives of men without any appeal or any accountability, except to your own conscience. Nor is this all. In many ways you may abuse the opportunities which your professional character will open to you. You will be admitted into the interior of families ; you will be made the depository of secrets which are carefully concealed from all the world besides ; you will see

your patients in their most unguarded hours ; their weaknesses, their vices will be exposed to you. A word spoken by you in resentment of some real or fancied wrong, or even in idle gossip, may inflict a deeper and sorer wound than any you have been called to heal. Learning and skill are not, then, the only qualifications for the faithful performance of your professional duties ; they demand integrity as well as capacity. As the lives of men are to be entrusted to your skill, so their reputations and the peace of their families are to be entrusted to your discretion and your honor.

Such are the important interests which are to be placed in your keeping ; and accordingly as you are well or ill-fitted for the trust ; accordingly as you now go forth honest and well instructed men, or the reverse, you may become the greatest benefactors or the greatest pests of society. Surely, we cannot estimate too highly the good which, as well qualified physicians, you may do, nor the evils which ignorance and dishonesty in your profession may bring about ; and if, unfortunately, it should turn out that you are unworthy of the trust, if, instead of preserving life and mitigating suffering, you should in your ignorance increase the mortality and pain of disease ; if you should basely use your professional opportunities for unworthy ends, how great would be our shame in having falsely certified to your capacity and integrity ; how great would be your crime, in having recklessly undertaken a task in which incompetence and dishonesty bring forth such disastrous results.

Though you are now to leave the halls in which you have been educated, your connection with the college is not to cease. Its fame must depend mainly on the character of those it sends forth into the profession, and all who are interested in its welfare will watch with concern your future career. If any of you should prove unworthy of the honor which has now been conferred on you it will be a source of regret and mortification to your instructors and a stain on the character of the college ; but if, on the other hand, we hear of you as pursuing a high and honorable professional career, introducing improvements into our art and diffusing its blessings over a wide circle, then, with a

feeling of a deep satisfaction it will be said, "That man was brought up in our school."

Before we separate this evening I would say a few words on the present condition of our profession, and on the course it behooves you to adopt in it.

You enter upon your professional career at a time when the public mind is singularly unsettled in regard to the practice of medicine, and when there is much to discourage your efforts to fit yourselves for the proper discharge of your duties. Medicine has in all ages been a field from which dishonest men have reaped an abundant harvest, but, perhaps, at no time more than at the present day. Lord Bacon makes the following remarks in relation to medicine in his day, and I quote them at some length because they apply so well to our own time :

"This variable composition of man's body hath made it an instrument easy to distemper ; and, therefore, the poets do well to conjoin music and medicine in Apollo, because the office of medicine is but to tune this curious harp of man's body and to reduce it to harmony. So then the subject being so variable, hath made the art by consequence more conjectural; art being conjectural hath made so much the more place to be left for imposture. For almost all other arts and sciences are judged by acts and masterpieces, as I may term them, and not by the successes and the events. The lawyer is judged by virtue of his pleading and not by the issue of the cause. The master of the ship is judged by the directing his course aright, and not by the fortune of the voyage. But the physician, and perhaps the politician, hath no particular acts demonstrative of his ability, but is judged most by the event which is ever but as it is taken ; for who can tell if a patient die or recover, or if a state be preserved or ruined, whether it be art or accident ? And, therefore, many times the impostor is prized and the man of virtue taxed. Nay, we see the weakness and the credulity of men is such as they will prefer a mountebank or witch before a learned physician. . . . For at all times, in the opinion of the multitude, witches and old women and impostors have had a competition with physicians. And what followeth ? Even this,

that physicians say to themselves as Solomon expresseth it upon a higher occasion: if it befall to me as it befalleth to the fools, why should I labor to be more wise? And, therefore, I cannot much blame physicians that they use commonly to intend some other art or practice which they fancy more than their profession. For you shall have of them antiquaries, poets, humanists, statesmen, merchants, divines, and in every one of them better than in their own profession; and no doubt upon this ground that they find that mediocrity and excellence in their art maketh no difference in profit or reputation towards their fitness; for the weakness of patients, and sweetness of life, and nature of hope maketh men depend upon physicians with all their defects."

There are several causes which concur in maintaining this strange delusion which maketh men "to prefer a witch or a mountebank before a learned physician." One great cause is undoubtedly that assigned by Lord Bacon, that while "in other arts and sciences men are judged by acts and masterpieces, in medicine they are judged by successes and events." The means by which a physician works for the cure of disease are for the most part hidden from the patient and friends, or at least are unintelligible to them, and hence they can only judge by the result; but since many diseases terminate favorably under no treatment or even under bad treatment, and since certain diseases go on inevitably to a fatal termination, so that some patients die under skillful management, and some get well under gross mismanagement, no correct judgment of the ability of the physician can be formed without taking into account the nature and severity of the disease and the curative means which have been employed. Besides this, traces of the notion prevailing among savages that diseases are to be cured by charms and incantations, still linger unconsciously among civilized people, and to this must be added the error, not yet wholly eradicated even from the profession, that medicines have some curative property in themselves apart from what depends on their intelligent use, which is very much as if one should suppose that the production of a piece of statuary depends on some peculiar property of the chisel and mallet and not on the genius of the artist. All these sources of error interfere with sound judgment in this matter.

One of the strangest phenomena of the present day is the existence of different schools or systems of practice, so that in this state we find besides our own medical body, two complete organizations established by law, representing what are called Homœopathic and Eclectic schools of medicine. The establishment of different schools or systems of legal practice or engineering would not be any more unreasonable than this, and it is worth while to inquire into the meaning of this absurd state of things, and to define the true position of our medical body to those sects which pretend to rival it.

There is, and there can be but one science and art of medicine ; it is that which is taught in medical schools all over the world, and which you have begun to learn. It bears the name of no man, for it is the work of the human race ; it is limited by no distinctive title, for it embraces all that has been attained in the knowledge of man in a state of health and disease, and of the means which have been devised for the relief and cure of physical suffering. It is founded on no general proposition nor doctrine, but on the whole science of man, in all its length and breadth. To call our body Allopathists is as absurd as it is insulting. It is supposed to mean that our practice is founded on the proposition that "contraries are cured by contraries," which we repudiate as a vain and unmeaning jingle of words. We are practitioners of medicine, not of Homœopathic nor Allopathic nor Hydropathic medicine, but of medicine, without any limiting adjective. We do not inquire whether like is cured by like, or contrary by contraries, for we consider these phrases void of contents and destitute of meaning, and no more applicable to the treatment of disease than to building a bridge or conducting a lawsuit. We have learned the structure and functions of the human body in a state of health and disease, and the action upon it of hygienic and therapeutic agents, and when we are called to a case of disease we observe the symptoms and examine the physical signs, and by means of the knowledge we bring with us we interpret the symptoms and signs, determine the nature of the disease, and devise means of cure. It takes more time and labor to learn this than to repeat phrases or as-

sumed propositions, but we consider the method, if more difficult, at least more reasonable and effective.

The medicine we profess had its origin with Hippocrates, or, at least, first received from him a scientific form, for its true origin was with the first man who undertook to contrive means for the relief of disease or accident. From this beginning it has come down to us through many changes and revolutions, in the course of which it has been enriched by the experience and labors and meditations of successive generations of men who have devoted themselves to its cultivation. By slow degrees, each step serving as a preparation for the next, it has advanced to its present condition, which, although far from perfection, is the whole of what man has thus far been able to accomplish in this direction. Among the laborers in this field we find some of the most illustrious men of ancient and modern times, so that if medicine still lags behind some of the other physical sciences, if it is wanting in the precision and certainty attained by them, the cause is to be sought in the intrinsic difficulty of the subject, and not in the lack of capacity of those by whom it has been cultivated.

Thus nourished on the traditions of the past and living on the labors of the present, medicine has by a continuous growth become what it now is. Imperfect both in theory and in practice, it demands and looks for further progress, but strives for this, not by discarding the attainments of the past, but by adding to them, and carrying them forward. It seeks to correct its errors, and fill up its deficiencies by careful observation and study. Fully recognizing its imperfection, it holds up no standard of orthodoxy. It strives only for truth, and rejects no contribution until it is proved to be worthless. In a word, medicine at the present day resumes all that has been done in the past and is the starting point for future progress.

Such is the origin and such the mode of growth of the science of medicine, and such is the relation it bears to the art of preventing and curing diseases. This art is long and difficult; its acquisition demands drudgery and repulsive labor. After years of earnest work you have just mastered its general outlines,

which you may fill up by a course of study and observation at the bedside, and after a long life thus spent you will even more than now recognize and lament your deficiencies. Outside of medicine thus constituted spring up systems which, disarding its traditions and methods, having consequently no roots in the past nor organic connection with its present, propose to furnish the means of practising the art without learning the long and difficult science on which it is founded. These systems recommend themselves to an incompetent public by their apparent simplicity, and to the indolence of the practitioner by the ease with which they are learned. They are short cuts to medicine, royal roads smooth and easy to travel, and leading, if not to the true end of medical art, at least to notoriety and pecuniary success.

These systems are brought forward before the medical body, are examined, discussed, and being found untrue in science and worthless in practice, are rejected, and then it is claimed by their authors and followers that it is impossible to get a fair hearing from the medical body, that its members are so wedded to old usages that discoveries and improvements are rejected simply because they are novelties and interfere with prejudices. Accordingly, since they cannot maintain a position in the profession, they separate themselves from it, decry its science and methods and make their appeals to the public.

Now of all possible charges that can be brought against the medical body, surely no one is more preposterous than this one of resisting innovations. Our journals teem with novelties, our text books in a few years fall behind the science and can with difficulty be brought out fast enough to keep the profession acquainted with the advances made. Not a single instance can be adduced of any improvement in medicine or indeed in any science in modern times which has not been greedily received by the scientific world. I suppose the names of Galileo and Harvey will occur to you, but the persecution of Galileo was theological and not scientific, and although the discovery of the circulation of blood by Harvey was not at the first well received in some quarters, yet it was only twenty-three years

after, that his statue was placed in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, and surely ever since his name has been held in reverence by the scientific world. But to come down to the present day ; look at the exploration of diseases of the chest by percussion auscultation and the other physical signs, which was introduced many years subsequent to the publication of Hahne-man's grotesque system, has this been coldly received ? Or look at the recent advances in histology and pathological anatomy and their application to the interpretation of disease ; have these been coldly received ? Or I might remind you of the brilliant discoveries in organic chemistry and physiology, or of the discovery and use of anæsthetics, or of valuable additions to our *materia medica*. Have these been coldly received ? And I might swell the list far beyond the limits of your patience, especially if I take into account all the supposed discoveries in medical science and practice which have been rejected only when their emptiness has been demonstrated, but which prove at least that suggested improvements in medicine do not have to go begging for a fair examination. Or let any one compare the text books of the present day on any branch of medical science or practice with those of fifty years ago, and then say whether the medical body is opposed to progress.

But when a system presents itself wearing the garb of imposture and announcing a pretended discovery without semblance of reason or the least atom of proof, as, for example, when we read that dropsy, hernia, spontaneous dislocations, cancer, and over one hundred other enumerated diseases are caused at all periods of life by itch imperfectly cured in childhood, and that one of the remedies for eradicating this disease from the body is one-millionth of a grain of oyster shell, each dose of which produces 1,000 enumerated symptoms, extending over a period of from thirty to forty days, and when we turn in disgust from such wretched folly, an outcry is raised by the indignant inventor and his dupes that an impartial hearing cannot be expected from men so imbued with prejudice, and with a most consummate impudence such men liken their case to that of Harvey and Galileo. Never is a foolish conceit kicked out of

scientific society but that a cry is raised of Harvey and Galileo. Oh ! with what contempt would the well disciplined minds of these great men look on the vagaries of those who would fain take a place by their side. No doubt these philosophers must have been grieved by the opposition their discoveries met with from their contemporaries, but how much more intense would have been their vexation could they have foreseen that their names were in future to be associated with those of so many blundering blockheads, whose crude notions had been spurned with contempt by men of sense, and who for that reason would fain hold themselves before the world as victims of scientific persecution.

While, then, there is no disposition in the medical profession to oppose the introduction of improvements, there is great unwillingness to abandon the precious treasure of science bequeathed to us by past centuries, and to adopt the idle speculations of system makers, who in their presumption would spin out a new science from their brains. The activity pervading every department of medicine is a sufficient answer to those who charge it with resistance to progress ; and here a fact worthy of remark presents itself, that all those great advances which in our day have changed the whole face of our science and art have had their origin within the profession and not in the outside systems. Turn over your text-books of histology, normal and pathological, of organic chemistry and physiology, or read the history of medicine during the present century, and see if you will find one result, however small, attributed to these parasitic growths living on medicine without contributing to its nourishment. The sterility of the systems is a sufficient proof of their emptiness and of the unsoundness of their methods.

I have now shown to you the characteristic errors of these systems ; but time will not permit me to follow them up and refute them individually. For you who know what medical science is, no refutation is needed ; and for those who have adopted them ignorantly and from caprice, no refutation would be sufficient, for it is vain to oppose arguments to opinions founded not on reason but on blind love of the marvelous. Be-

sides, even if by refutation we could drive out of vogue the prevailing systems, they would be succeeded by others equally futile and perhaps more pernicious. The simplicity of the man who sat down by the riverside to wait until the water should flow by, so that he might pass over dry shod, was not greater than that of him who in our day should suppose that the great river of human folly and credulity will ever run dry. It would seem that henceforward there must be two classes of medical practitioners, one to minister to popular caprice and credulity, and the other to practice the art according to the principles and rules derived from the long labors of the past. For a long time there will be folly enough in the public to support the first class, and this folly will be tempered with wisdom and prudence enough to keep the second class from starvation.

I congratulate you, gentlemen, on the choice you have made, in passing by these royal roads to medicine, or at least to popular favor and emolument, and adopting the only path by which the temple of medical science is to be reached, that which lies through long and patient study.

If our profession presents much that is discouraging and repulsive, it also presents much that is attractive. It is our privilege to be engaged in the study of the human body, the most interesting and comprehensive of all sciences, for in this study we are introduced to all the others, no branch of human knowledge being foreign to it. The idea of life lies at the basis of all philosophy. The body of man was by the ancients called a microcosm, or miniature world, in contrast with the macrocosm or greater world. No other science in the same degree enlarges the mind by the comprehensive views it lays open to us, nor so ravishes us by the admirable order it presents. It is a beautiful subject of contemplation, what Bacon calls this curious harp of man's body which it is our business to tune and reduce to harmony. "In explaining these things," says Galen, in an anatomical work, "I esteem myself as composing a solemn hymn to the author of our bodily frame, and in this I think there is more true piety than in sacrificing to him hecatombs of oxen or burnt offerings of most costly perfumes, for I must endeavor to

know him myself and afterwards to show him to others, to inform them how great is his wisdom, his virtue and his goodness."

If the study of our science conduces to elevation of mind, the practice of our art is healthful in its moral influence. It is our business to relieve suffering, and benevolence grows by what it feeds on. Without improper boasting, I am sure it may be said that the medical profession has at all times been noted for charity and self-devotion. What a sacrifice of ease and leisure is made by physicians, in their attendance on the poor, and with what readiness do they expose themselves to contagious diseases ! How much is now doing by physicians, in the study and application of sanitary science, not only without pecuniary reward, but even in many instances at pecuniary sacrifice for the sake of an ungrateful public, which, when it condescends to adopt some sanitary improvement, appears to think it is doing a favor to the doctors.

This great treasure of science—these traditions of self-devotion and honor—are now to be placed in your keeping. Let it be your care not to bury these precious talents in the earth, but to improve them and hand them down with increase to your successors, to add at least one stone to the pyramid which has reached its present elevation by the labors of those who have gone before, and thus pay to the future the debt you owe to the past.

And now, gentlemen, in the name of your instructors, and of the officers of this institution, I bid you God speed in the noble mission to which you have devoted your lives. Whether your career shall be brilliant or not, will depend largely on your own efforts, but also on advantages of natural capacity and of fortune, which are beyond your control. For the faithful use of all the means of self-improvement and of doing good, which are placed in your hands, you will be held responsible ; for your success you are not responsible, and although I would by no means wish you to despise the advantages of fortune and social position, those great stimulants to exertion, yet I will assure you of one thing, that every day you live you will be more and more convinced

that they are of less value than a quiet conscience and your own self-respect. Be careful, then, that in your eagerness for success you do not lose sight of that which alone can make success valuable—the consciousness of having merited it.

Whatever fate Providence may have in reserve for you, whether prosperous or adverse, brilliant or obscure, we earnestly hope you may always possess this one consolation, which is far above all external advantages, in the reflection that the talents which God has placed in your hands have been faithfully used in the service of your fellow-men.

